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The Lincoln Highway

Carol Ahlgren re-marking the original Lincoln Highway near Clarks, Nebraska in July 1996. Union Pacific tracks to the left, Lincoln Highway to the right. Photo by Curt McConnell.

Since 1992, the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office has incorporated documentation of the Lincoln Highway into its statewide historic buildings survey. Dedicated in 1913, the Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental highway, intended as a toll-free paved road providing the shortest distance between New York and San Francisco. The highway was also a visionary memorial: a coast-to-coast “monument” to Abraham Lincoln.

In Nebraska, the Lincoln Highway represents an early-20th-century addition to the historic Platte River valley where routes of the Overland Trail, Pony Express, and Union Pacific main line traverse the state in a relatively narrow corridor. Completion of Interstate 80, the most recent addition to this corridor, has contributed to the decline of businesses and towns along the original transcontinental route. The period of gradual

Lincoln Highway is now U.S. Route 30, but earlier sections remain: narrow

gravel or concrete roads, brick-paved streets through small town main streets, individual motel courts, and gas stations.

Continued documentation of the original and subsequent routes of the Lincoln Highway and its associated resources is essential to evaluate what remains. Survey and evaluation, it is hoped, will lead to the preservation and rediscovery of this pioneer automotive trail. Attention given to the documentation of historic highways is a relatively recent addition to the field of historic preservation. While examples of National Register nominations in recent years cover a range of resources such as early road segments and associated buildings, by their nature many of these roadside resources are ephemeral. Some of the building types, such as individual motel cabins, were altered within a decade of their construction. In other cases, construction was make-shift and temporary, making the buildings easy to remodel or relocate.

Roadside architecture (including “attractions” such as tepee gift shops and windmill gas stations) have typically been the focus of early efforts to document and designate resources associated with the automobile. Roadside architecture, however unique and eye-catching, is only one component of the highway as an historic transportation corridor. This is especially evident in a place like Nebraska, where buildings and towns are often separated by vast rural areas.

Comprehensive surveys of highways as historic transportation corridors enables preservationists to understand these resources within their larger context. Another perspective which further enhances the study of historic highways is to view them as cultural landscapes. Such a perspective involves including the human response—both current and historic—the stories of individuals who lived beside the road, travelled on it, or made their living from a roadside business. These stories and memories of the road may explain what is there now, but also may be the only connection for buildings and places that are long gone.

The highway as cultural landscape encompasses the evolution of the road, its resources through time, as well as its historic and continued



Historic postcard, c. 1915, showing the original Lincoln Highway in Merrick County, Nebraska. Union Pacific railroad tracks are to the right. Courtesy of the author.

abandonment of the old road, which has left associated buildings altered for new uses or in ruins, may be considered as part of the evolution of their preservation. The abandonment, decline, and in some cases disappearance of tangible evidence of historic highways often creates the inspiration to rediscover, document, and preserve what remains.

In many places in Nebraska, the Lincoln Highway has come full circle and has returned to what it was before—a gravel section line road that closely parallels the Union Pacific railroad tracks. The highway is once again the road that leads to town, and the road home. Much of the original

meaning for people. In western Nebraska, for example, an original 1928 concrete Lincoln Highway marker has become a flag pole and elaborate bird house stand for the older man who lives nearby. One small town in eastern Nebraska features a one-sided, one block-long main street which parallels the original Lincoln Highway, the railroad tracks, and U.S. Route 30. The original route is clearly visible, marked by an "alle" of Hackberry trees; the park-like setting is mowed and maintained by local residents.

Conversely, in several areas, farmers have planted rows of corn in the narrow right-of-way between the Union Pacific tracks and U.S. Route 30. Many of these areas which represent the original Lincoln Highway roadbed are not seen as an historic highway but as a means to increase crop production.

Sometimes, there are few resources to record in the traditional preservation sense. It is easy to lose sight of, or not understand, the historic and current importance of the highway to local residents. Clarks, a small Merrick county town in eastern Nebraska (1990 population: 370), provides a good example. Established in the 1870s

highway was redesignated as U.S. Route 30 in the late 1920s, the route through downtown Clarks was by-passed; the old and new highways are separated by the Union Pacific tracks.

Today, the original route of the Lincoln Highway is a two-mile stretch of gravel road that extends east and west from the downtown. The road is gravel with the exception of a two-block area of wide brick paving at the heart of downtown, where the main street is perpendicular to the historic road and railroad tracks. Many of the one-story brick commercial buildings have been altered and several are vacant, leaving little to document except the road itself. Across the tracks on U.S. Route 30 are two early motel complexes, which reinforce the physical evidence of the highway's evolution.

Nonetheless, the Lincoln Highway was and still is important to the community. Last year, near the main downtown intersection, high school students painted a mural on the entire side of a brick building. The building fronts the extant brick section of the old road, and the mural includes a depiction of the Lincoln Highway running through town. During the mural painting, older residents prepared stories for the newspaper about their memories of the Lincoln Highway. Lincoln Highway enthusiasts enroute to the Lincoln Highway Association convention in Cheyenne, Wyoming were feted by the community. The residents lined both sides of the street and greeted cars on their way to the conference, proclaiming the celebration "Lincoln Highway Day."

Recently, area residents resurrected the enthusiasm and pride of original Lincoln Highway boosters. Present-day residents of Clarks painted the historic red, white, and blue logo on telephone poles along the two-mile segment. By re-marking the highway, the residents of Clarks celebrated its historic connection to their community. They also proclaimed their pride in being known, once again, as a town of the Lincoln Highway. For Clarks and hundreds of other small towns on the Lincoln Highway, the intangible and less visible aspects of the highway are as important as the resources which remain.

As preservationists grapple with the issues of documentation and integrity when recording segments of road and individual roadside buildings, we need to keep in mind the highway as a cultural landscape that connects both places and people with history and memory.

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Clarks, Nebraska volunteers in front of one of 14 electric light poles marked with the historic Lincoln Highway logo, July 1996. Note brick-paved Lincoln Highway in background. Photo by Curt McConnell.



along the Union Pacific railroad line, the original town consisted of frame false-front buildings parallel to the tracks. Typical of towns throughout the Great Plains, most of the original commercial buildings burned or were torn down.

In 1912-13, the designation of the route of the Lincoln Highway had an impact as tremendous as the railroad that preceded it. Merrick County residents had been enthusiastic boosters of the Lincoln Highway—so much so that the nation's first signing of the Lincoln Highway proclamation occurred at the county courthouse in Central City, 12 miles west of Clarks. The original Lincoln Highway into Clarke was a gravel section line road parallel to the Union Pacific tracks. When the